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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

What If Derrida Was Wrong about Saussure?

14 April 2011

The three books of Jacques Derrida's *annus mirabilis*, 1967 - *L'Écriture et la différence*, *La voix et le phénomène* and *De la grammatologie* - along with much of his work of the following decade, depend crucially on his deconstruction of the linguistics and semiology of the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), assembled posthumously from lectures and notes by Ferdinand de Saussure.

At the heart of Derrida's critique was the revelation of a deep incongruity. For Saussure, the linguistic sign is the union of a signifier (or sound pattern) and a signified (or concept). Both are mental rather than physical. Neither has any positive content. Rather, every signifier and signified is purely a value, generated by its difference from every other signifier and signified in the language.

But, Derrida objected, even if this were broadly true, it could not apply to difference itself. By the terms of Saussure's own model, the signified "difference" would have to exist prior to any value supposedly generated by it. Derrida concluded that, by requiring difference paradoxically to be its own origin, Saussure gave it the covert status of a "transcendental signified", directly contradicting his insistence that signifier and signified come into existence simultaneously and are as inseparable as the front and back of a sheet of paper.

This breathtaking critique has proven irresistible to later generations of students who know Saussure only through Derrida's reading of him. Linguistics alone engages with Saussure in his original context, rather than the infinite metaphysical plane on to which Derrida thrust him. But linguists who read Derrida simply dismiss him as misrepresenting their founding figure, leaving the Derridean version to stand uncontested.

Until now. This book is the first systematic analysis of all of Derrida's published pronouncements on Saussure's *Cours*, including its impassioned rejection of writing as only a secondary representation of language, the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and the problem of its existence in time. The last is, more precisely, one of the topics pursued seriously by Saussure that Derrida never took up - thus allowing him to depict Saussure as implying certain ideas that in fact he directly rejected.

Daylight patiently combs through the fine silk weave on which Derrida has painted his broad brushstrokes. He leads us step by step through each of Derrida's readings of Saussure, then sometimes back again through the same texts as we proceed to the next set of Derridean claims. Daylight sees his task not as defending Saussure from falsehoods, but showing that Derrida's interpretation is by no means the only possible one.

Regarding the transcendental status of difference, Daylight argues that if, like Derrida, "one takes the position that the constitution of a system must precede the system, then certain truths are possible", whereas if, like Saussure, "one takes the position that the conditions of the system can be situated as objects within that system, then other truths are possible". Only keeping both positions open allows a real engagement between them. That requires resisting (while not necessarily ceasing to admire) the force of Derrida's rhetorical imposition of his own stance not as a position among others, but as how the universe is.

Daylight's microscopic analysis is matched with a telescopic gaze over what stands or falls on whether Derrida was right about Saussure across a broad range of intellectual fields. His study contributes at least as much to our understanding of the philosopher-historian as of the philologist-grammarian, and marks a sea change in the reception of both. That is no mean feat. To have achieved it with such clarity of exposition, elegance of expression and depth of insight makes this book a rare and indispensable tour de force.

What If Derrida Was Wrong about Saussure?

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Reviewer:

John E. Joseph is professor of applied linguistics, University of Edinburgh. His Leverhulme Trust-funded biography of Ferdinand de Saussure is in press.